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THE ELEMENTARY FORMS OF ORNAMENTATION.

By FREDERIC FISCHBACH.

A. LIGHT AND COLOUR. — RADIATION AND DEVELOPMENT.

"The Body's Form its Being's essence is:
Penetrate this, th' Enigma's seal is loosed."

With these words the Poet points out to us the importance of Form, that we may endeavour to approach, in some degree, one of the eternal and unfathomable enigmas, the Ideal of our highest aspirations, Beauty itself. Let us try to lift, if but a little, the mysterious veil which, equally in nature and art, conceals from the outward eye the origin and essence of Forms.

That a law does exist, our artistic instincts almost unconsciously declare, but the difficulty is to find its true enunciation, or so give any precise idea of it in words. Reason, in its refinements, ever lags far behind, and is tardy in proving what instinct has long before felt and represented to itself. In our modern civilisation the latter has been so often led into false paths by bad examples that we must content ourselves with employing the better conceptions as correct ones. So may the following researches in an almost unbeaten track, give an impulse to further inquiries, for which the Coryphæi of science have other facilities than the ornamentist, who has only this advantage, that he can uninterruptedly study practically the elementary phenomena, which he must employ in innumerable combinations. Form and Colour, however different in their essence, are, in every perfect work of art, almost inseparable. It is only by means of light that form can be made apparent to the sense of sight, and the first impression it makes upon the eye, is that of a mass upon which more or less light is thrown. Light cannot shine for itself alone; it must

unite itself with some material object which partly absorbs and partly reflects it, or divides it into colours.

Light flows from Form, and Form it beautifies,
And Form arrests it in its path.

Goethe.

The solution of the question, how it is that an object can absorb all the other colours of light, as for example, all except blue and red, and so present only these colours to the eye, we leave for the future to determine; in the present article, we do not propose to extend our inquiries into the chemical and physical properties of light, and the reciprocal action of form and colour upon each other; but only intend to enter upon the ideal effect which has its root in our artistic sentiment. Does there exist any law for colour, which we know to be merely a perception of the sense of sight and which is therefore an impalpable object. This is our question, one which we can at the present day more easily consider, since we know that the origin of all colour is light.

I must be allowed however, to offer a few general remarks by way of preface. In the first place, I would call attention to the fact, that there is this difference between the ornamentation of the East and West, that, with the former, colour is considered of the first importance, so that form is quite subordinate, while with the latter, colour is not considered until the finished form is to be endowed with it.

It is unquestionable that none but an exceptionally organised natural disposition can be endued with so identical a sensibility to form and colour as to be productive in both simultaneously. We do not desire how-

ever to underrate our own intuitive taste for the Ideal, the Symbolical, or for logical consistency, if, in the following lines, we feel obliged to acknowledge the great capacity which the East displays for colour ornamentation. We might almost say that colour is too delicate an essence to be touched by the combinations of the intellect and that therefore, like the bloom upon the flower, it must be left wholly and solely to the feelings. For the rest, we will by no means depreciate the very high claims of ideal ornamentation, or the representative symbolical ornaments, by which we give expression to our ideas, for we are indebted to the more elevated genius of Europe in this respect for our magnificent specimens of monumental art, and a development of their style at different epochs, which the mere talent of the Orientals for colour, confined and fantastic as it was, could never approach. But if the contact with the East renovated western art, so that the origin of all important forms of ornament must be traced to it, on the other hand we find in the East a coyness to European ornaments, as these but seldom correspond with the laws of the composition of colours, and give expression to ideas quite foreign to oriental thought.

When we consider that light and colour make the first impression on the eye, and that it is only through them that the mind can take cognisance of what is imparted to it by the medium of the senses, we cannot refuse to recognise the great importance of colour as a phenomenon appreciable by the senses. This importance becomes still greater in all the cases, and they are very numerous, in which the purely decorative colour ornamentation stands foremost, and the constructive and symbolic element is neglected, as, for example in the varicoloured glass mosaics.

While considering the oriental glass mosaic in the windows of the palace of the Bey of Tunis in the Paris exhibition of 1867, the panes of, I cannot call it painted, but varicoloured glass, of not more than one or two inches in size, and half overshadowed by the thick lead frames, and remembering the splendid colouring of the great rose window of Strasburg cathedral, which I had shortly before admired, I was led to study the important law of the influence of transparent radiating colours on form. I had long before remarked that the rosace form plays a conspicuous part in all glittering objects, such as cut stones, glass etc., and in such natural objects as snow and the generality of flowers. The observation of the general law of development in plants etc., and the experimental application of this law in ornamentation, led me to adopt these views and to lay them down as the fundamental laws of ornamentation.

The artists who have distinguished themselves by the most practical essays on ornamentation are Viollet le Duc, Semper, Boetticher and Owen-Jones. It was hardly to be expected that in our modern times, when we are just beginning to set ourselves against the colourless fashion of the day, these artists, as architects, would do otherwise than place the constructive and technical elements in the foreground, and give but little attention to

the influence of colour upon form. But since the oriental colour decoration has become more familiar to us in museums and textile fabrics, it is certainly time that this void should be supplied.

We are now, unfortunately, accustomed to make use of the architectural constructive and symbolical ornaments for artistic surface decoration, and we frequently mistake our task, which is to produce simple but genuine effects by a prudent economy of our means, that is, by allowing colour, material and technique to speak for themselves through their own elementary beauty, just as an artistic and self developed nature would speak for itself. This would appear the more, in proportion as an ornament was more and more repeated; while if it appears singly, and therefore of more significance, it loses more of its neutral character, and expresses some individual idea of our own.

The physiological reason why the numberless repetitions of geometrical ornaments are least of all fatiguing to the sight is, that our eye can follow involuntarily and incessantly the proportions and the rythmical flow of the geometrical lines. The eye drinks in the charm of their harmonious contrasts in their simple elementary forms, our fancy enlivening that which is in itself lifeless, the square, circle, triangle, etc. In fact the eye is affected in the same manner as the ear by any melody, which must be clear and simple, otherwise it becomes fatiguing. Representative ornaments seem to make too pretentious a claim to our thoughts and intellectual sensibilities, so that they easily become tedious on frequent repetition. The laws of statics in architecture make constructive ornaments a necessity, but their motives should not be transferred to surface ornamentation, except as suggestive reminiscences. Besides, the harmonious contrasts of the lines of direction play a very important part in every kind of decoration, and we shall have occasion to return to their consideration.

If we now inquire what form best corresponds with any colour, we must first of all look to all those ornaments which are of little significance when destitute of colour, and only receive from it their especial charm, namely the simple linear ornaments.

Embroidery patterns, of which we give a few specimens, and especially the Arabian patterns offer striking examples. Conversely on the other hand, we find symbolical and plastic ornaments, which are so rich in representative ideas that we scarcely feel the absence of colour (v. Nos. 4, 5a and 5b). There is no question but that the first kind of geometrical lines belong to the category of pure colour ornamentation. We shall see further on how these develop themselves into plant and animal ornaments, but still in such a manner that the geometrical origination of the lines never disappears. Let us grant that the geometrical lines form, as it were, the skeleton of the symbolical ornaments, around which the living forms are applied, and that the geometrical lines only find their deeper significance in colour, yet no one will deny that there is an influence in colour over every form of ornament, however independent it may be

in its own elementary form. How far the geometrical lines are connected with light and colour we shall perceive from the following considerations.

Throughout the whole phenomena of created forms we observe two laws: 1. the exterior, unorganic formation, through the crystalline rythmical application round a particular point, that is, the expansive development, as, for example in snow*; 2. the organic, through the partition of the germ, and the unfolding its separate parts, either in a particular direction, or rythmically, that is, like rays grouped round a central point. The law of development we may observe in light, which, through any dull medium, and by refraction, divides itself to our sight, into its different rays of colour.

The fundamental principle of colour ornamentation lies in Radiation, which has its most beautiful exemplification in the rosette or star. Knowing, as we now do, that colour is a part of light, we have the key to the solution of an apparently unimportant law, which notwithstanding its seeming insignificance, we must pronounce a fundamental law of ornamentation.

If indeed we acknowledge the radiation of light, that is to say, its development in rays round an illuminating point, we must also acknowledge its existence in colours, which are parts of light. Consequently groups of colour will find their most beautiful distribution in the rosette. The kaleidoscope affords a good proof of this, for it shows differently coloured objects, small pieces of coloured glass, petals of flowers etc., in rosettes with six, eight or twelve rays, and constantly in different groupings. The beauty of its play of colour is well known, but it quickly sank into a child's toy, because it was maintained with justice, that mere accident should never form the basis of art. Still we would not altogether dispense with this toy as useless for the purposes of art, for we might often utilise its charming and surprising patterns in our own combinations, and in this way, it is really of much value. But, as we have already remarked, we combine with this law of colour and light, the fundamental principle of all created forms, namely the development from and round the germ, which is seen in radiation.

The germ as it unfolds itself, develops itself, as it were, by the division and expansion of its parts**. The contrast to such development is seen in contraction and involution. So we find a much prized ornament in all those spiral forms which partly unfold and partly contract themselves in a regularly rythmical manner (Figs. 14—20). Next to the geometrical lines, the most graceful

for the rosettes are the plant forms, especially for representing the development from a visible germ. An especially beautiful example of this is seen in the palmette. The most unyielding in this respect are the animal and human forms, for they can scarcely ever follow the linear scheme in the principal, but only in the secondary work (as for example in the hair, drapery etc.) without losing life and individuality. Where indeed animal and human forms do appear, they must as far as possible yield to the rythm of the motive lines, and can only produce any effect by contrast in respect to their massiveness and symbolism. In representations of this kind, ornamentation almost passes into high art, and such individual forms should only be employed in particular places, and always with moderation. If a total transformation does not take place, as for example, through the union with plantforms, the features of men and animals are, in strict ornamentation, subordinate to an ornamental play of lines, and they break forth in tragic and comic masks, in water-spouts etc., where however it is no arbitrary fantasy that prevails, but a well considered law of ornamental art.

B. GENERAL FORMS.

Starting from a central point from which to begin our observation, a circular spot of greater or less dimension represents to us the concrete, primitive, undeveloped form: when curved this primitive figure, in contrast to the straight line, appears moved more or less energetically, and thus as it were animated from within, so that the eye seems obliged to follow the apparent movement, as well as to seek the imaginary point which forms the centre of the periphery. In many cases such circular lines serve for the expression of development, as with buds, and of enlargement, as in vases, or of contraction or narrowing. This simple characteristic of the lines is especially important; for the eye, as we have already remarked, instinctively and continually compares their position and movement, and the position and degree of the angles, as well as the proportion of the whole.

The straight line serves partly for a connecting line, as in the band ornament, and partly as a line of direction, as in fluting. In an essay on constructive ornament and proportion, we should have to speak of the forms of connecting, framing, separating, girding, finishing, crowning, supporting and suspending; here we merely remark that the simple rosette ornament is the symbol of all that is free or suspended, as in the ornaments for floorings and ceilings, so that it will find its special application in all bright and coloured materials, such as polished stones, gold and silver ornaments, carpets etc. The transition from dead matter into the organic form of life is expressed in the inflated curve line which betokens an inward strength and rich exuberance. Contrasts will find place in size, number, direction, grouping, colouring etc. Great charm lies in the repetition of contrasts under different conditions, for example, the same forms in different colouring. It is as

* 800 differently shaped snow rosettes have been observed, of which we subjoin a few.

** Any material, which gives the idea of great divisibility, as for example, woven fabrics, becomes from its very nature, more valuable in an artistic sense, than a hard indivisible material. The latter can only by a rich refraction, by which the surface seems illuminated, diminish the impression of lifeless stiffness. This law is of course of less importance in architecture, where massiveness, durability, and economy have to be considered, although here also it appears almost necessary that materials nearly destitute of light in themselves should be concealed by colours.

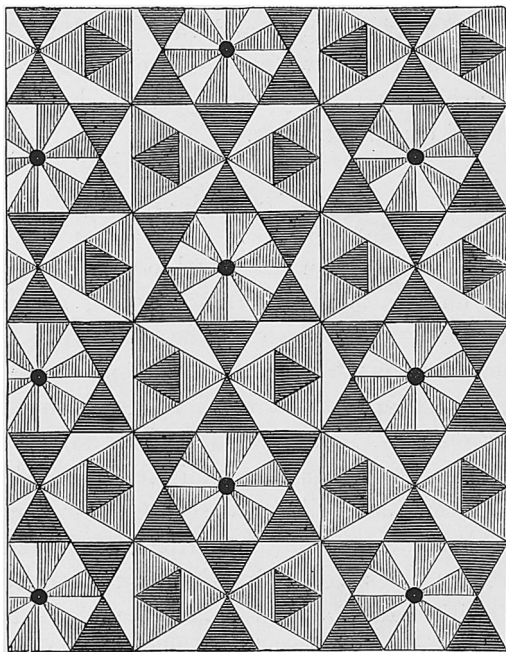
impossible to express exactly the motives which give rise to such contrasts as to find words for the varied movements in a national dance. We feel but obscurely in the elementary and animated forms of vegetation the ideas of seeking and avoiding, of bending and inclining, of parrying and thrusting, of clinging and embracing, or of striving upwards, falling downwards and supporting, and distinguish with difficulty the luxurious and the meagre, the proud and the humble, the free and the fettered, the suppressed and the exultant. But our own sentiments ought to be easily interpreted; hence, the chief task of the ornamentor is to express in elementary language the harmonious abundance of the sentiments of a refined mind. It is quite correct to divide simple forms into contrasting figures, since it produces variety in the

unity and development of the elementary forms, for our fancy must be so powerfully stimulated by the development of things that we should feel compelled to continue their development in our own imagination.

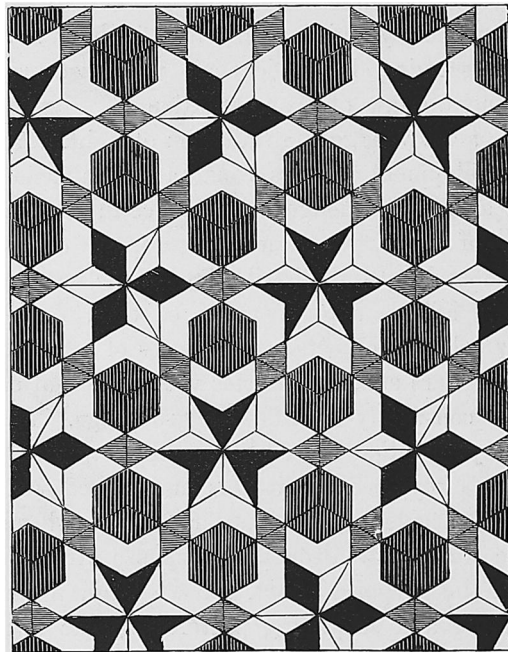
Briefly, we repeat, the development by radiation around a definite nucleus, either in all directions or only in one, is the fundamental principle in the creation of form.

The harmony of contrasts, that is to say, unity in variety, a rythm of lines in colour etc., is an elementary law, while it is an ideal law of style that the significant and poetical symbol should be produced in the front, but not too frequently repeated.

(To be continued in the next number.)



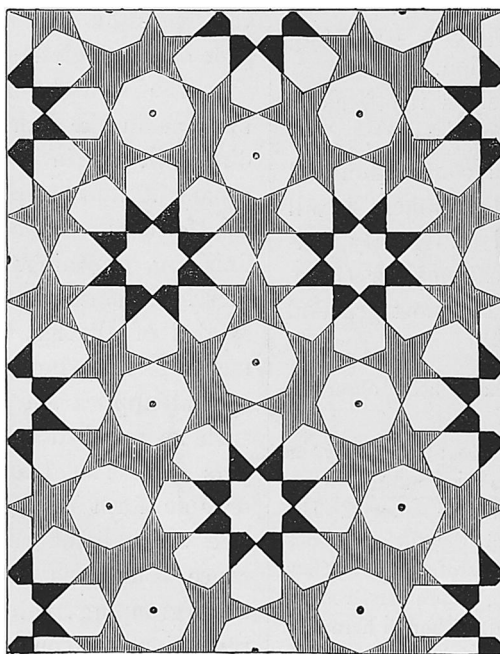
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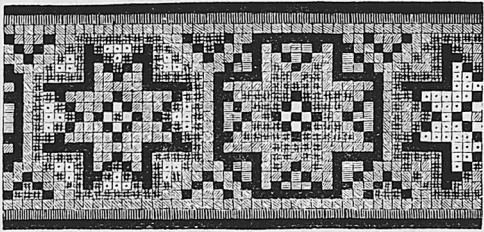
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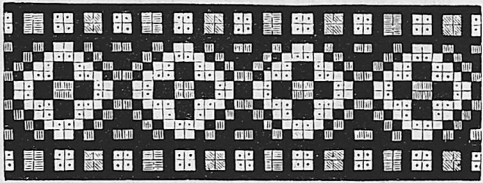
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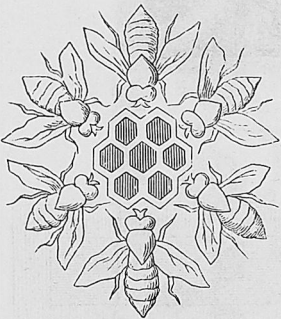
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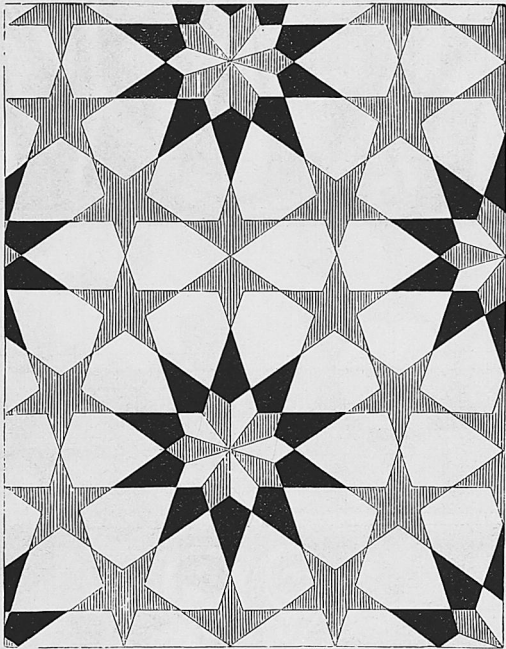
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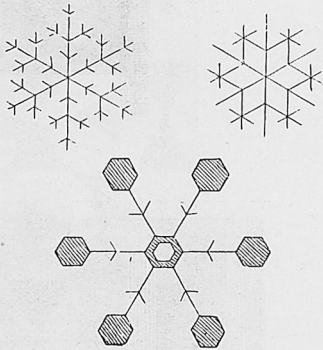
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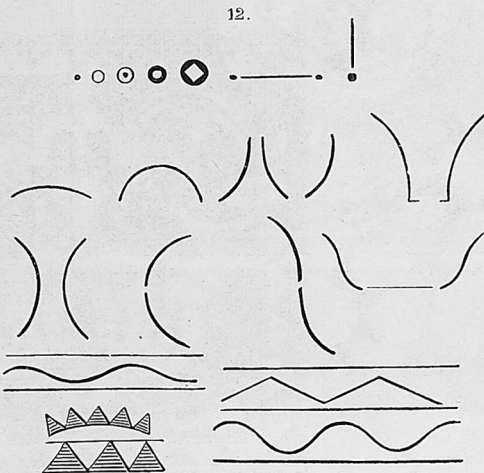
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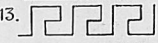
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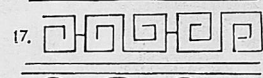
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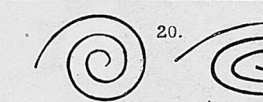
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